

Epiphany 5 B
Mark 1:29-39
February 4, 2025

“The Reason for Being”
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

²⁹As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. ³⁰Now Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. ³¹He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them. ³²That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. ³³And the whole city was gathered around the door. ³⁴And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him. ³⁵In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. ³⁶And Simon and his companions hunted for him. ³⁷When they found him, they said to him, “Everyone is searching for you.” ³⁸He answered, “Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.” ³⁹And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

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On the way home from church, a little girl’s father asked her what she wanted to be when she grows up. Her response surprised him. “I am thinking of being a minister when I grow up,” she announced. “Why is that?” her father asked. “Well,” she began, “I figure I have to go to church on Sundays anyway, and I think it’ll be a lot more fun to stand and yell than to just sit and listen.”

Do you remember being asked that question: What do you want to be when you grow up? I certainly do. In fact, in my hometown, it was tradition for all the kindergarteners to go to the principal's office to answer that very question. I still remember Mr. Davis sitting behind his massive desk. He was an enormous man – probably 6' 4" and he had bright red tufts of hair around his ears and wide-framed brown glasses. He smiled at me, invited me to sit down, folded his hands and asked the question he'd already asked to dozens of other kids that day. "Brandon, what do you want to be when you grow up?" "A knight in shining armor," I replied with self-importance. Of course, he smiled and I went back to class. The kicker was, however, in my hometown, it was also the tradition to print all the kindergarteners' responses to this question in the local newspaper. I can only imagine my parent's pride...

After I outgrew the "knight phase," I briefly planned to become a veterinarian. Then, I just wanted to be rich so I decided I'd be a lawyer. Finally, in high school, I settled on becoming a psychotherapist. That phase lasted until just before seminary. Even when I started seminary, I had no intention of becoming a minister. That was NEVER what I wanted to be when I grew up. And here I am.

There's a point in our lives when the question of what we want to be when we grow up, takes a deeply existentialist turn and we started asking questions like, "Who am I?" or "What am I here for?" or "What am I supposed to do with my life?" For some, the answer feels clear, solid, and sure. And for others it's as vapid as an early morning fog that "burns off" with the rising sun. I have known 18-year-olds who knew beyond a shadow of a doubt and I have known 60-year-olds that had utterly no idea.

It would be interesting to ponder what it was like for Jesus to think through all this. No doubt, as a child and teen, it would've been assumed that he'd follow in his father's footsteps and become a carpenter. Maybe he did, in fact, it's likely that he did, but at some point, things changed for him. He became a rabbi, an itinerant preacher, and healer. At some point, it became not about what he would be, but what he would do – his purpose,

his reason for being. It would be interesting to ponder what it was like for Jesus to think through all this, but today, we're going to be guided in our exploration of the existential question by another character, an unnamed character in our reading from Mark's gospel.

We meet her in the home of Simon Peter and his brother Andrew. She is a mother, the mother of Peter's wife – yes, Peter was married – and she had become ill with a fever – apparently, gravely ill. Jesus takes her by the hand to help her up. Later in Mark's Gospel, Jesus will take the hand of the deceased daughter of a synagogue leader named Jairus. He'll take the hand of an epileptic youth whose seizures have brought him to the brink of death. But today, he takes the hand of this unnamed mother and there's healing in the touch – the fever left her. The text says it this way: “He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her.” The phrase “lifted her up” in this story is the word, “raised”—literally, “he raised her up” just as he would raise up a paralyzed man, a man with a withered hand, the dead daughter of Jairus, and an epileptic youth. In Mark's gospel, Jesus raises people up. His is a ministry of resurrection and this unnamed woman, Peter's mother-in-law, is the first resurrection story in the gospel.

What happens next is really the hinge pin of this sermon: the woman begins to serve them. Now, if I'm honest, at first read, I was inclined to poke fun at the notion of resurrecting this woman just so she could make a meal for the men, or stoke the fire, or fetch water. At first read, I was disappointed that the seemingly altruistic healing of a sick woman had as its ulterior motive a hot meal and a cool drink – a reassertion of the status quo and a poignant reminder of the relegation of women to domestic tasks in the first century and in most centuries after. However, that isn't actually what's going on here.

The Reverend, Doctor Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, Dean, President, and Professor of New Testament at the Seminary of the Southwest in Austin, Texas, points out that the verb translated as “serves” is the same word used for waiting table and doing ministry. It's the same word Jesus used

when he described his mission saying that: “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve.” Serving epitomizes Jesus’ own ministry and this woman’s service is to be interpreted as a model response of faith. She is both “an icon of resurrection and a paradigm of Christian ministry.”¹

I began this sermon by talking about what we wanted to be when we grew up, then by asking the existential questions of “what is our purpose?” and “why are we here?” The truth is, most of us will struggle with these questions at one time or another and some of us will struggle with these questions on a daily basis. As people of faith and as Christians, as little-Christ in the world, the answer to those questions is surprisingly clear. As the unnamed woman in our reading from Mark’s gospel modeled for us and as Jesus himself modeled for us, the answer is simple. What is our purpose and why are we here? To serve. To be in ministry with and for the world. To make the world a better place. That’s our purpose. That’s the answer to the existential question. That is our *raison d’etre* – our reason for being.

How we do that is where it gets interesting, gets exciting, gets fun. There’s no one-size-fits-all answer to how we go about doing this. Some will dedicate themselves to rearing the next generation to be responsible, caring, kind global citizens. Others will pour themselves into their work on behalf of those marginalized or oppressed. Others will make phone calls, send cards, or offer prayers of encouragement. Others will tap the reserves of creativity to pen poetry, play music, or create art that reminds us of humanity’s best qualities. Still others will serve those who are hungry, advocate for those who are in need, listen to those who are lonely, befriend those who are dying, or care for earth’s creatures. In big and little ways, we are called to lives of service, of ministry, of making the world a better place. That is our purpose. May God guide each of us as we explore how we will do it.

Amen

¹ Cynthia Briggs Kittredge. “Commentary on Mark 1:29-39,” Workingpreacher.org, February 4, 2018: http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3547.